CRITICAL AMERICANS
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For Frank and Mary Butler
Parents, teachers, friends
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Things do really gain in greatness by being acted on a great and cosmopolitan stage, because there is inspiration in the thronged audience and the nearer match that puts men on their mettle.

James Russell Lowell, “A Great Public Character,” 1867

We have lived through a period of the world’s history of surpassing interest & enormous change. But we have seen only the beginning of the mightiest revolution in human affairs, and we shall have to quit the stage in the very middle of a most entertaining scene.

I, however, shall not be sorry to go, though my curiosity as to what is about to happen may never be satisfied.

Charles Eliot Norton to Goldwin Smith, August 30, 1905
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This project began with books. Quite literally. On a trip to New York City early in my graduate career, I browsed through shelves of deaccessioned books outside Columbia University’s Butler Library. Dusty volumes in shades of navy, maroon, and dark green stretched on for yards: twenty-five cents a book, five for a dollar. I had only recently decided to study American history and was intrigued by the multiple volumes filled with the writings of people whose names were only faintly recognizable: the life and letters of Charles Eliot Norton, the complete prose writings and poetical works of James Russell Lowell, the orations and addresses of George William Curtis, the essay collections of Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Twenty dollars poorer and the car weighed down by an impressive new library of nineteenth-century Americana, I headed back to New Haven and began reading.

What I read fascinated me, and I decided to work through my fascination in a research paper for David Brion Davis. But when I began reading the secondary scholarship concerning this group of Americans, my fascination turned to consternation. The richness and texture of these nineteenth-century writings seemed flattened out in dull abstractions with such names as “The Genteel Tradition” and “Liberal Reform.” The scholarly treatment seemed especially perplexing when I compared these figures with their British counterparts (and, it turned out, correspondents), who had engendered a lively and compelling body of scholarship.

While my interest was engaged from the beginning, my sense of the present-day relevance of these writings soon followed. Indeed, in the many years I have worked on this book, I have been struck by the enduring relevance of the concerns raised by these men. I began this project amid a compelling debate over why Americans hated politics or the media or both and over how to make parties more responsive to citizens than to corporations. If this debate called to mind liberal Victorian ideas about the press, public opinion, and democracy, debates over Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club further evoked late-nineteenth-century efforts to sort out the relationships among literature, democracy, and the marketplace. When I began writing a new (and final) version of the manuscript in 2004, we had entered into a very different historical moment. A con-
troversial war (deemed a war of liberation by its proponents and denounced as an unnecessary war of aggression by its critics) brought with it inescapable echoes of the late nineteenth century. The curiously evolving timeliness of nineteenth-century liberal debates, the way their resonance has only amplified from year to year, has confirmed my belief that we still have something to learn from this generation of liberal reformers.

This book may have begun with the deaccessioned books from Butler Library found on that cold January day, but it was shaped, nurtured, and completed only with the help of many individuals and institutions. I thank the following sources for their generous financial assistance at various stages of this project: the Graduate School at Yale University; the John F. Enders Research Fund; the Beinecke Library, Yale University; the Nelson Rockefeller Program on Non-Profit Organizations, Yale University; the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation; the Massachusetts Historical Society; the American Antiquarian Society; the Intramural Research Grant Program, Michigan State University; the Faculty Development Research Fund, James Madison College; and the Walter and Constance Burke Award and the Nelson Rockefeller Center for the Social Sciences at Dartmouth College.

The directors, librarians, and staff members at the following institutions facilitated my research enormously: the Beinecke Library and Sterling Library, Yale University; Houghton Library, Widener Library, and University Archives, Harvard University; Massachusetts Historical Society; American Antiquarian Society; Bodleian Library, Oxford University; British Library; Library of Congress, Manuscripts Division; British Library for Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics; University Library, University of Cambridge; Huntington Library; Newberry Library; and New York Public Library, Manuscripts Division. I especially thank the Bodleian Library, British Library for Political and Economic Science, Houghton Library, Harvard University Archives, and Massachusetts Historical Society for permission to quote from their collections.

For more than a decade now, I have benefited from the cultivating and critical efforts of several mentors and advisers, whom I am happy to thank here. Cynthia Russett and Frank Turner offered incisive feedback and encouragement at various stages of the book’s evolution. Their broad learning and equally broad range of interests provided a continual stimulus to new thinking. David Brion Davis has influenced this project in so many ways and on so many levels that it is hard to know how to thank him. He was willing to take me on as a novice student in American history, and his enthusiastic response to the first
research paper I wrote for him led me to believe that there was something to be said about nineteenth-century liberal reformers. He represents the very best of earnest, engaged scholarship and teaching, and it has been a great privilege to have worked with him.

Daniel Walker Howe offered advice and encouragement during some memorable conversations at Oxford University. He also read and commented on an early version of the manuscript, helping me enormously in my revisions. I was fortunate that the University of North Carolina Press found two readers, David Hall and Wilfred McClay, who offered thoughtful comments on not just one but two versions of this book. Their judicious blend of praise and critique helped improve the final product. Hall’s involvement has gone well beyond this official capacity: his article, “The Victorian Connection,” influenced my thinking about transatlantic liberals at a very early stage in the project; at a very late stage, he suggested the title “Critical Americans,” which gave clarity and shape to the final revisions.

Many people have commented on, argued with, or listened to various portions and drafts of this manuscript. I thank Steven Biel, Tom Brown, James Connolly, Nancy Cott, Amy DeRogatis, Ann Fabian, David Hackett Fischer, Sherman Garnett, Julia Grant, Peter Dobkin Hall, Kristin Hoganson, James Kloppenberg, Paul Kramer, Michael McGerr, John McGreevy, Dorothy Ross, Joan Shelly Rubin, David Sacks, Sam Thomas, Alan Trachtenberg, James Turner, and Dick Zinman. I also thank Duncan Bell of Cambridge University and Peter Cain of Sheffield Hallam University, who generously shared with me their forthcoming work on Victorian foreign and imperial policy.

Colleagues at Reed College, James Madison College of Michigan State University, and Dartmouth College have provided stimulating and collegial atmospheres in which to teach and learn. I especially thank Allison Berg and Colleen Tremonte at James Madison College for their friendship and support. I have also benefited from a cadre of helpful research assistants: Natasha Appenheimer, Kelly Miller, and Ed Timke at James Madison College and Lisa Ding, Nikhil Gore, Davida Kornreich, and Laura Pearlstein at Dartmouth College. Amanda Behm was never a research assistant, but I learned much while supervising her thesis on conservative British responses to the American Civil War.

At Dartmouth, the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding ran a wonderfully invigorating seminar on a late draft of the manuscript. I thank the center; its assistant director, Christianne Hardy Wohlforth; and my colleagues around the college who generously read and commented on the entire manuscript: Amy Allen, Michael Ermarth, Carl Estabrook, Jim Murphy,
Annelise Orleck, Jay Satterfield, Ivy Schweitzer, and Allan Stam. Ted Widmer and Caroline Winterer not only read and commented on the manuscript but braved the perils of a New Hampshire January to come and discuss it in person. I thank them all and know that the book is better for their input. At UNC Press, Chuck Grench, Katy O’Brien, and Paula Wald expertly (and patiently) guided the manuscript through the publication process. As copyeditor, Ellen Goldlust-Gingrich helped sharpen many a dull sentence and tie up many a loose end.

Making literally all the difference in the world, as all working mothers know, have been the many trustworthy hands into which I have confidently placed my children while I teach and write. I feel incredibly lucky to be able to thank the loving and professional teachers and staff at the Dartmouth College Child Care Center, who every day transform what could be a necessary evil into a positive good.

Like the work of many academics, versions of this book were written at different moments and in different places: begun in New Haven (Connecticut); revised in Portland (Oregon and Maine), Cambridge and Worcester (Massachusetts), and East Lansing (Michigan); and finally rewritten entirely in Hanover (New Hampshire). Amid the inevitable disorder of these many moves, my family has provided continuity and stability. Without them, nothing (including my sanity) would have been possible.

My in-laws, Patricia and Wally Bigbee, offered encouragement and support as well as endless home improvements. My sisters, Jamie, Alison, Katie, and Jess, and more recently my brothers-in-law, John, Greg, and Tony, have provided an unflagging network of friendship, love, and good humor. Ali went even further, kindly feigning an interest in the subject (sparked by Matthew Pearl’s *The Dante Club*, which lent Victorian men of letters a kind of action-hero appeal) and reading around in the manuscript itself. My parents, to whom this book is dedicated, have contributed endlessly to it. Their emotional and financial generosity seems to know no bounds (and I’ve surely tested them). Even before they required that my sisters and I write weekly summer book reports when we were young, they instilled in me a love of reading and a passion for learning that have never departed. For that, as for everything else, I thank them.

The last word goes to my boys, all four of them. That William Butler Bonner, Matthew Francis Bonner, and Cameron Robert Bonner have delayed the completion of this project will come as no surprise, especially to those who know that high-spirited trio. Will, Matt, and Cameron have provided hours of
(usually welcome) distraction from writing and countless moments of (always welcome) exhilaration as they shared with me their zest for living and their curiosity about the world around them. I was either gestating or nursing one of the boys almost the entire time I was writing and revising this book. I look forward with real pleasure to some uninterrupted playtime.

And then there is Bob. I was lucky enough to have met Bob at the beginning of graduate school and smart enough to have married him at the end of it. He has been bound up with this project and with my development as a historian from the beginning—from that initial book-shopping spree at Butler Library long ago to the final round of revisions. He has spent more hours than he probably cares to recall thinking and talking about nineteenth-century Anglo-American liberals and has read every word of every draft of every version of this book (often more than once). In short, his contributions to this project have been colossal. And while he knows that better than anyone, what he may not know is this: vast as those contributions have been, they are the very least he has given me. The rest is too enormous for words.
CRITICAL AMERICANS
Introduction

They had come to praise Charles Eliot Norton. Gathered in their elegant new building on Boylston Street on a November day in 1908, the members of the Massachusetts Historical Society remembered the life and work of their recently deceased friend with tributes to his high cultivation and cosmopolitanism. Even within the rarified world of Brahmin Boston, Norton had been the prototype of the Harvard aesthete, sustaining exceptionally extensive ties to the transatlantic world of Victorian letters. Here was one of the leading Victorian art historians, a translator of Dante, a confidante of intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic, the literary executor or editor of Emerson, Carlyle, Ruskin, and Lowell. Here was a man, his friends recalled, whose lifelong work had been to raise the tone of his country and to help Americans smooth what not a few in the audience considered the nation’s rough edges.

Most of these tributes were unremarkable, featuring a group of aging Victorians—many of them thick around the middle, even more thin around the hairline—gathered to eulogize one of their own. Amid the remembrances, the antislavery movement veteran and Civil War colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson stood to speak. He did so with a full head of hair and with an octogenarian frame that hinted at his lifelong athleticism. Yes, Norton had done much for his country, this commander of black troops acknowledged, “but something needs now to be said in turn for that which this country did, in the meanwhile, for him.”

Though his speech meandered somewhat, Higginson offered an incisive appraisal of Norton’s life. Higginson appreciated how the United States had anchored the Harvard professor in a place where he might put his learning and cosmopolitanism to practical use. America’s role as the world’s exemplar of popular government, Higginson explained, had strengthened his friend’s sense of civic duty and had offered an aspiration noble enough to give purpose and meaning to Norton’s life’s work. While Old World friends such as the art critic John Ruskin had pitted Norton his vulgar New World existence, Norton had